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Up-and-Comers: News for Students and New Archivists

Assistant Editor: Johna Picco, Filson Historical Society. Contact Johna at johna.picco@gmail.com if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

Insights from a Recent Grad Now Running an Archive

By Ryan Welle, Minnesota Military Museum

As I was completing my master's degree from UW–Madison, I, like most students, was frantically looking for that next opportunity. I hoped that opportunity would be somewhere that I could work, develop my skills, and utilize the education I had received. I was writing cover letters and sending my resume to every position that caught my eye, and was having difficulty landing the interviews necessary to bring me to the next stage in the hiring process. I started asking others in my program if they were having any luck finding a job for after we graduated, and it seemed that times were tough for others, as well. I began to notice that the places where I applied would either turn me away because I did not have the experience they were looking for or simply did not respond to my application. I soon realized that I likely would not have a full-time position postgraduation and would have to spend my time either interning or volunteering.

Then it finally happened. I got an offer for an internship position for the summer, and I jumped at the opportunity. I couldn't have been happier! The staff I was working with were absolutely great, the location had so many things that I loved, and I really learned a lot about the archival field and that knowledge helped me better understand what kind of archivist I wanted to be. However, once the internship was over, I was back in the same boat of applying for the next opportunity. What was different, though, was that I was more confident in what I wanted to do as well as what jobs I should, and could, be applying for. Heeding the advice from one of my mentors "to never leave the field once you are in," I decided to do volunteer work at a local historical society rather than engage in out-of-field work while I waited to land a job.

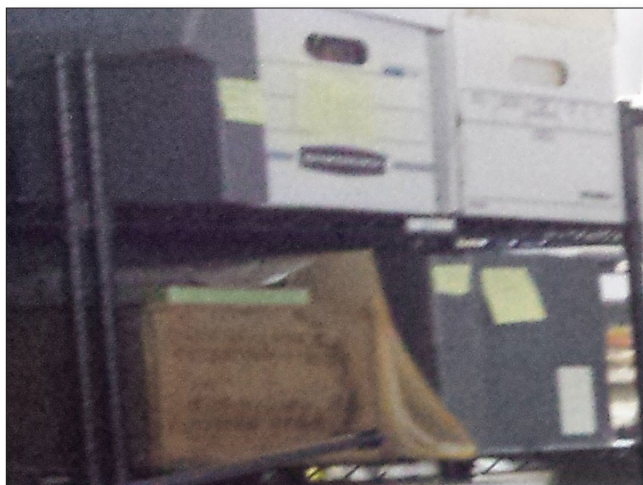
I heard about a position opening at the Minnesota Military Museum from some friends and was interested immediately. The subject matter of the collections had always interested me, and the position would allow me to stay in the Midwest, which was a goal of mine. Needless to say, I applied. I progressed through the interview process until I was offered the job, which I accepted right away.

Yet my acceptance of the offer didn't come without hesitation; I had some concerns about the position. I would be the only person working in the archives, meaning that I

would not have someone checking my work and guiding me on what to do. The archivist before me did a lot of work to get the archives to where it was, but a huge amount of work still needed to be done. Also, I had no prior experience working with some items. Despite these reservations, I decided to take the position. I knew that the job would allow me to grow professionally and that the challenges would not be impossible to overcome. I had built a network of support both through previous positions and attending conferences, such as the MAC Annual Meeting, that I could turn to for advice. The huge amount of work would get done one piece at a time, whether I was the one to do it or someone else. And, I told myself, the only way to feel more comfortable around foreign formats was to begin working with them.

Once I finally started working, I was a bit overwhelmed by the amount of work that needed to be accomplished. In addition, others at the organization did not provide much direction. Often my thinking was, just keep working and let them know how it is going. They would, and sometimes still do, say that they do not know much about how archives operate and that they are relying on the fact that I have a degree and prior experience working in archives to know what I am doing. Often these statements remind me of something that a friend of mine said during a presentation at the MAC 2016 Annual Meeting in Milwaukee about others not knowing what you know, and that is why they hired you.

That statement took on new life when I was helping with my first major accession and appraisal at the Minnesota Military Museum. I learned a lot from this experience in which we went to a former board member's house and brought the majority of his research materials back to the museum. I was there to make the assessments of what should be taken and what would be unnecessary for the archives to keep. This was a more difficult task than I imagined, especially because I did not know of potential gaps in the collection. The experience was made even more difficult by the limited amount of time we had to look through the mountains of materials that the donor had accumulated throughout his life, in addition to the fact that our donor could be the textbook definition of a hoarder.



Processing work that still needs to be done. Photo by Ryan Welle

The process of gathering the materials also became a balancing act. I found myself between people with very different views on what was necessary to keep and the value (or lack thereof) of the things we were finding. This was particularly difficult because those with differing opinions were board members who were also close friends with the donor. Despite this, I was able to rely on my education and use it to justify the tough and sometimes unpopular decisions. The experience also helped me to better understand when it is appropriate to be firm in a decision and when it is better to compromise and find common ground.



Sample of some of the materials gathered during my first major accession. Photo by Ryan Welle

It did not take long for me to begin feeling on steady ground in my position at the Minnesota Military Museum. I communicated with my predecessor to ask questions when I needed specific, collections-related advice and relied on others in the field for broader questions. I have started to gain control of various projects underway for the archives and the museum as a whole. Some of these projects include the veterans' registry, created to provide a platform for the sharing of stories from veterans who have a connection to Minnesota; processing projects; and the completion of several digitization projects started, but not finished, prior to my arrival. One of these digital projects provides digital access to honor rolls and muster rolls for veterans of WWI. I am excited to see what new projects await as well as how this position will continue to teach me new things and help me develop my skills in the years to come.

In closing, I wish to share some insights that have been helpful to me and I hope can help others as well:

To students and/or new professionals: Do not give up when you get turned down from job opportunities. It is okay to spend some time at internships or volunteering after you receive your diploma. To repeat the advice I got from one of my mentors: it is always more difficult to get back into the field after you leave. Try to find internship positions that that will teach you the skills needed for jobs you're interested in pursuing full time. Finally, do not be afraid to take a risk; the position may look intimidating and challenging, but it can still be a great experience and you learn more when you challenge yourself.

To those in charge of the hiring process: Understand that the individuals who may not have a lot of experience "on paper" may have the skills to match the position you are filling, and it is okay to sometimes give them a chance. However, there are always more people seeking positions than there are openings. Speaking as someone who recently went through the process of seeking a position, if you decide not to hire an applicant, please let him or her know right away. Few things are worse than waiting, and waiting, to hear back about a job.